



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN SOCIAL SCIENCE

Volume 11 Issue 2 Version 1.0 March 2011

Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal

Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)

ISSN: 0975-587X

Indigenous Art of West Africa in Wood

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Abstracts - : Art as it has been defined severally, it has many definitions of its own, but in the context of this paper. Art will be defined as a means of self-expression with the medium which one is familiar with. Wood is one of the very important means of artistic representation which the Africans have used and are still making use of in bringing forth and producing artistic works aimed at documenting peoples way of life as well as their religious and socio- cultural values. African wood sculptures are not older than two centuries old because of the susceptible nature of wood to the destructive effect of termites and climate. Wood is the Africans most favourite material or medium for sculpture. Hard, termite-resistant woods are preferred for sculpture, Iroko wood (*chlorophora excelsa*), Mahogany and Ebony varieties which are suitable for extremely delicate carving. For the large masks lighter woods are chosen, which do not weigh so heavy when worn. The African traditional artist or carver doesn't just go to the forest to fell trees indiscriminately. If there is any particular tree they are interested in, in the forest, they carry out some sacrifices to find out from the tree itself if it would like to be fell or not. And if any particular tree is to be felled, they carry out some sacrifices before they touch the tree at all. I would like to make the following West African countries as my area of focus in this paper with particular references to their masks, stools and architectural designs. These countries are Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra-Leone and Mali.

Classification: *GJHSS-A Classification: FOR Code: 190102*



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Indigenous Art of West Africa in Wood

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I. INTRODUCTION

Art as it has been defined severally, it has many definitions of its own, but in the context of this paper. Art will be defined as a means of self-expression with the medium which one is familiar with. Wood is one of the very important means of artistic representation which the Africans have used and are still making use of in bringing forth and producing artistic works aimed at documenting peoples way of life as well as their religious and socio-cultural values.

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II. YORUBA FIGURES IN NIGERIA

The Yorubas are the most prolific sculptors in Nigeria, they are noted for their wooden veranda post, ceremonial masks for the Gelede, (figure 2) Egungun, Epa cults, Twins figures (figure 1) used in the cult of the twins, staff and bowls for the worship of Shango (figure 3) (the god of thunder), bowls and trays for the Ifa divination.

The Yorubas have some highly decorative stools, drums and lamps and also in the complicated figures compositions of the elaborate pillars of temples and chiefs houses, we will see evidence of fertile imagination and a great sense of architectural designs.

The Yoruba figure carvings show certain very distinctive characteristics. The figures are lively and shows great variety, every posture is attempted, and the trunk and body no longer remain in one axis, forms are rounded, but are kept clear-cut and decisive, there is the usual African tendency towards enlarged heads and great reduction in the size of the legs. The form of the head is usually unmistakable; the general shape of the face is naturalistic, with pointed chin and large brow; the features are strongly marked. The eyes are long and pointed at each end, with the lower lip nearly as large as the upper and the pupil of the eye is gouged out. The nose is broad at both root and base, with well-marked nostrils, the mouth protrudes, thick-lipped and does not narrow at the ends, which are slightly upturned. The ears are set high and well back on the head, faces are cicatrized on the cheeks, and sometimes on the forehead with tribal markings.

The most common wood figures among the Yorubas of the south-western part of Nigeria are the "Ere-Ibeji". These are carved statuettes carved to commemorate the dead twins that died in their infancy. The soul of the deceased is transferred to it. The wooden images are washed, dressed and fed every four-four days i.e. during every market days, and then the parents may dance around in the marketplace asking for alms, she also offers special prayers and rituals every week. The figures have identifiable styles that could be traced to certain regions.

The statuettes conform to the Yoruba aesthetics of physical proportion. The head is one third the size of the body, because the head among the Yorubas is associated with a person's destiny or "Ori-Inu" that determine the successes or failures in life. Emphasis is on human resemblance rather than photographic likeness facial features are stylized. Generally the surface is shining and smooth.

III. AMONG THE IGBOS

The Ibo figures, known as Ikenga, often consists of highly complicated carvings, they are the personal protectors of the master of the house and are consulted in every family crises. Among the Igbos of Southern Nigeria, we have Ikenga figures (figure 7). Ancestor figures and the Ogbom figures from the headdress as a form of Igbo figures connected with the Ikenga cult. The Ikenga means a altar for the power of the right hand as a team for the effective force of manhood. Whenever the foundation of a house is laid such a figure is set up and destroyed again at the death of the owner. It also acts

as the god of destroyer. It is asked for advice at any important occasion and honoured with palmwine and kolanuts.

A typical Ikenga figure has a massive coiled ram horn with abstracted human face. A shape that looked like fat letter "E" looks or is situated where the ear is supposed to be. It has the characteristic of a straight long neck similar to those of Mbari figures. It carries a knife and trophy head with ringed designs around them.

IV. MASKS

Masks are used majorly by masquerades to commemorate certain traditional festivals as in cult activities whose activities are showed in secrecy. Notable examples are the Egungun mask, Gelede mask, Epa and Ekime masks.

This rather sophisticated art of naturalism is seen clearly in a type of masks common to the Egungun and Gelede societies of the Yoruba. The Gelede masquerades are done to appear the "Iya" which refers to the power of the women folk who are witches. They are believed to have to have power that can twist anybody's destiny, fortune and health. The Gelede society is found among certain branches of the Yoruba, and holds similar ceremonies to the Egungun society. They are made in paints and are always female, whatever the sex of the deceased at which burial they are used. To this type of masks Murray (1989) says:-

"Yoruba, They have a large number of religious cults Whose members belong to them by right of birth or who have joined them on account of advice conveyed to them by divination. These societies have celebrations at yearly festivals and funerals.....among these is Egungun which usually associated with the foundation of the town and is therefore performed to precitate the ancestors and to promote its prosperity during the festival the chief of the town does homage to the head Egungun who in return blesses him and the whole town."

The Gelede masks are the closest to Ife art in naturalism. The facial features are well defined and have commonly three parallel markings on their cheeks. Mostly the human head is depicted with some superstructure. The superstructure may be simply a bicycle rider or as complex as a ladder with as many as six parrots. This superstructures function as an identity for viewers to know the character which the masquerade is portraying. This is more of the conventional and more contemporary use as entertainment masquerade.

There are some other types of masks like the Epa mask (figure 6) of the Ora people, the Epa mask are made in the Ekiti area of the north-east Yoruba land and are used in cults to honour their heroes, heroines and their ancestors. The Epa masks are big masks or

headdress that could be as high as six feet. The face is stylized and with a slit at the mouth to allow the weaver to see. The mask could carry about twenty figures of kings on horsebacks, leopards, traditional doctors, women and children. The images are repainted yearly with traditional earth colours, before performances festivities and dancing taken place in front of their sacred grove. The ceremony in which the masks are used takes place once or twice in a year. In some places however, the ceremony is in honour of Ogun," the god of iron and war and at times usually marks the cutting of new yams.

Among the Igbo of the Eastern part of Nigeria are different masks, the Ekpo Njawhaw society of the Igbo and Ibibio has been quoted as an example of the more pleasant forms of Secret Society in Eastern Nigeria. The Most noticeable general characteristics of the mask of the Ibo is their extreme refinement and delicacy, compared with so much of the work of other African tribes. A large number of these masks are said to represent maiden Spirit or beautiful girls, these are often set in contract with other ugly elephant spirits, or mischievous he goat who chase small boys, and so on. Many of the marks used by the Ibo Mmo Society are of this maiden spirit type. They are of two Types. The Larger ones has a thin High crest, running from back to front of the head; this crest, running from back to front of the head; this crest is highly ornamented with fretted carvings. The top of the mask is carved as a cap shape, to fit over the head; While the face is long and triangular. The face is whitened and has black or blue-lined brows, eyes and lips. The second kind of masks representing the maiden spirits in the dance of the Mmo society is much smaller.

Talbot (1974), writing of the uses of these masks among the Ibo says:

"The Images are entirely covered by voluminous clothes the upper part often composed of some knitted materials, occasionally a sort of kilt is worn, but the legs are always hidden by cloth or knitted trousers. A Wooden masks is used, which is at times placed on top of the man's head so as to give him increased height, while he himself looks out through narrow slits below."

Nearly all masks are painted white, like the clay statues of ancestors in the Mbari houses, and some are of very great interest and display undoubted Egyptian traits".

In one of the Ibo dance within their society called "Ayolugbe" Murray says; "Three to seven white faced masks are used; they represent the spirit of the maidens with their mother, and have dignity and beauty. The masks are "made to measure", and with them is worn a tight-fitting costume of gorgeous colour decorated with appliqué work in which red and yellow predominate. These masks of small size are sewn to the costume and are superstructure".

There are several other masks among the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria such as the masks of the Igojiji society or Iko Okochi of Afikpo, Ehi masks of Ogoni tribe.

V. STOOLS

The stools among the Igbos is regarded as an item to show their wealth and social status. The stools symbolises the owner's wealth and status. The stool became more elaborate as the social status or ladder is climbed. However, There are simple stools for ordinary people (figure4).

VI. BOWLS

Among the Yorubas, respect for elders and visitors is very much emphasized. Children and women compulsorily kneel to present gifts especially Kola, to elders and the bowls that are often used are elaborately decorated wooden bowls. Designs for these bowls Vary from simple designs of geometrical, stylized Zoomorphic and anthropomorphic designs to figures carrying bowls on their head. The figures are sometimes females or even males and equestrian figures too. Most of the designs are caryatids.

Wooden bowls with decorative face of Esu are used to hold the Opele (Ifa divination seeds). They are also made into board with decorative edges and powered or sprinkled with "Iyefun Ife" which the Ifa priest draws symbolic lines with his fingers. (figure3)

Among the Igbos, there are kola bowls also like that of the Yorubas. Decorative bowls are used to present kola to visitors as among the Yorubas and also show a symbol of hospitality.

VII. ARCHITECTURAL DECORATIONS

Wooden architectural decorations are in the forms of panel doors and posts.

The Igbo have decorative panels. Some have representations of kings and their wives. Their style is predominantly abstract. There are also stories of marriages ceremonies and chieftaincy festivals. Also images of fortune-tellers. Usually there is an entrance door panel and there are others set against the wall covering the wall of the compound. The Igbos love curves, dynamic forms and bright colours, these could be seen in all their works. Abstracted figure alternate with other of starting realism. Other panels have holes through which the ancestors overlook the compound. They use linear and basic designs especially concentric circles.

Among the Yoruba-speaking people of Nigeria are carved doors decorated with animals motifs like snakes, stylised reptiles and some human figures. Generally they depict historical records or occurrences. Their wooden veranda posts depicts the quality of the

works and it equally shows the type of occupation of the people of the area. (figure9)

VIII. THE DOGON OF MALI

The Dogon, lives in the northern Mali and they are called Habbe which means the unbelievers by the Fulani, because they resisted Islam when it was introduced to them.

Their carving is of great variety and interest, the sculptures refers to ancient myths, the creator god Amma and as incantations of life force. It was also the Nommo who became men. The smith, the Nommo who had become the seventh man came down to earth either on horseback or in an ark, bringing with him important cultural materials and techniques.

The myths also tell of the most of Duyu seru and Yasigi, a sin which upset the great cosmic order and was atoned for by the sacrifice of one of the Nommo. A remarkable fun, discovered in bidden cares in the rock, were the bundles of figures joined together with iron chairs, often in a naturalistic style and made of wood as hard as stone, encrusted with a red grey covering made of ashes, animals, blood and millet bear. There is no doubt that these figures are centuries old; a carbon dating places them in the thirteenth century. The genuine Dogon style is very far from naturalistic. It is symmetrical and firm in outline, built up of clearly defined stereometric elements. The slim, length bodies, in which the free trunk can still be detected, from the very arch type of the pole style. The arrangement of the hair is such that it continues the line of the profile in a semi circle running back in the center of the head. The breasts are balance by the heavy shoulder blades; in this style, the basic requisite is balance, the face is completely unrealistic, with a nose like a straight arrowhead, a short horizontal chin, and the ears drawn as a semi-circle. The large hands often lie on the thighs or the knees. The dogon statues with their through going simplification, produce a solemn and monumental effect.

Abstract to the ultimate degree, and reduced as it were to a sign, these figures are found on cult objects, doors, doors locks, butler dishes, loom handle pulleys and other tools. These themes, refers to the event of mythology and to the laws of life and growth. Thus are found the smith as the seventh Nommo and the first Dogon, with a ribbed cap and a beard, or as a rider. Figures set upon the other recall Aru, the cumming unburper of the country, and his brother we see Yasigi who committed incest, or Dyngu Seiu, who hides his face from shame. Raised arms signify entreaty for the protection of the mythical creative force, or an invocation to the ram clouds to pour ram upon the dry land. The original ancestor couple, the androgynous ancestor on the pedestal, and stool with the four pairs of figures of the eight Nommo, as well as the other rarer compositions with several heads, are a symbol of the

universe and manifest the eternally valid order of the cosmos to which man must subject himself.

Masks are not made by the smith but by the novices of the men's secret society and the wood used is the lightwood of the kapok tree. They have the same cubic structure as the statues; always starkly rectangular, sometimes shaped into a point at the top, with eyes, carved out as triangles or rectangles, lying in deep vertical grooves beside the sharp arrowhead ridge of the narrow nose. The nose may also be broken by Zigzag marks. The mouth is shown in abstract form. This basic form is painted in various ways, adored with horns, animal ears and other features, to show what kind of creature is meant, and whether a Nommo, a human being or an animal is represented.

Each type of mask has its own distinctive dance step. The Kanaga mask, called "the hand of god", with its headdress in the form of a cross of lorraine, indicates a bird in flight, while others interpret it as crocodile. All these various types of mask more than a hundred in number are derived from the great imina-na mother mask, which is conceived in the form of a snake. It is ten yards long, and is therefore much too large to be worn.

The ancestors' figures of the Dogon are the most impressive figure in wood, their carvings consist in certain very old and very rare statues of single or pairs of figures of the placed by the bodies of the dead at burial ceremonies.

In addition to the ancestor figures there are female fertility figure, which confirm to the general schema, but are far less impressive than the burial carvings. The Dogon masks have about then something of the same statues give, impersonal quality as their cult figures, for many of them are architectural rather than representational in form.

IX. THE BAMBARA OF MALI

The Bambara of Mali lives very close to the Bari river and on both sides of the upper Niger, are an important Mande speaking tribe, almost a million in number. They are the heirs of two kingdoms. Segu (1600-1881) and Kaarta (1670-1851) they were predominantly farmers.

The Bambara believe in the great light and creator god FARO, a kind of redeemer and organiser of the universe, who is enthroned in the seventh heaven and sends the rain which brings fertility. His sacred colour is white.

According to myth Faro bestowed upon men, their conscience, order and purity, as well as their sense of responsibility. He brought them corn and taught them how to work. Faro also regarded as bringing good fortune.

The carvings of Bambara present a great number of types and varieties and are in general of a several monumental but elegant style. The figures are

composed of cubist forms, with this pillar like bodies. The arms hang down at the sides. The Bambara, for instance, concentrate on building up wonderfully balanced pieces of three dimensional designs carved in to a flowing decorative pattern in the their antelopes crests.

The female has a transverse hairstyle, based on the short ringlets that project sharply sideways on the heads of female figures which are used on fertility cult and are also found on door latches. Figures also decorate the bowls in which she butter is kept. The statues can be divided in to three main groups of styles Viz;

1. The figures of the northern Segu which is characterised by a prominent hooked nose, protruding eyes, breasts placed high on the body, large hands like paddles and large, stable feet.
2. the southern style, found round Bamako, figures have a straight profile, the breasts are often placed low;
3. the third group, from the region between Buqul and Diollo, have softer lines and sensitive features, they are crowned by a tall cap with bands falling away at each side and they are shown standing, riding or seated on a chair. The surface of the figure is considerably decayed throughout.

The people of Bambara have also become world famous because of their Chiwara headdresses for the antelope dance which is amongst the most beautiful and indigenous works of African Sculptures. There are also the male and female antelopes which always form a pair and the great spirit would kill anyone who tried to separate them.

The Chi Wara headdresses are made as numerous brilliant variations, differing according to place and time and never alike. Three main groups of Chi Wara can be distinguished.

1. The "Segu-Minianka type of the eastern Bambara Design, between Sikasso, Kutiala, including the Minianka, an enclave of the Senufo in the Bambara region. The structure is vertical above a small body rises a powerful curved neck with a broad band of decorative openwork, a firm narrow head and slightly curved horns beaming spiral curves, leaps across horizontally formed as two parts, which are joined together at the neck with a metal ring.

The "Suguru type' found in the village around Buguni in the south-western Bambara region. It's a vertical abstract type, interplay of forms between the Zig-Zag patterns, to a point and the strange bodies, is extraordinarily attractive and imaginative. The dance for which the

Suguni type is used is more wild than in the case of other types.

The most important group of masks is used by the More society. The masks are worn when the water spent has to be called upon for rain and growth. The form of the Kore masks is unrealistic, so much that the animal they represent is the type of animal that is almost unrecognizable. They are mainly hyenas, monkeys, lions, antelopes and horses.

X. GHANA STOOLS

The Ashantis of Ghana do not represents their gods in sculptures like the rest do but gain contact with the supernatural by means of the gold. Legend tells us that the stool fall from heaven during a storm around the year 1700, right on the knee of the great king Oseitutu, who founded the kingdom. The throne became not merely the symbol of the state, but also the altar on which sacrifice was offered to the invisible gods. The Ashante regarded it as the seat of the soul of their people and as a guarantee of health and prosperity.

The stools are simple and rectangular and are put in charge of the king, queen mother, lineage heads, town and chiefs. Each person is supposed to have a stool. It is only the king who can have a tiger or an elephant representation in his stool. Some stools are covered with the king having monopoly of gold, therefore the natural stool is in gold.

XI. FIGURES

Among the Akan of Ghana, have also statuettes commonly called "Akuaba". The figure is supposed to induce pregnancy and bring a beautiful lady at birth. After being blessed by a priest, a woman carries the statuettes around it with beautiful beads, nurses it and puts it to bed. The statuettes illustrates Ashantes concept of a beautiful child; a high oral, flattened forehead (achieved by massaging the infant, soft skull at birth) a small mouth, a neck ringed with creases of subcutaneous fat indicating good living and healthy living of the child. Most Akuaba dolls or statuettes depict females since among the Ashante Matrilineal descent is practised.

XII. SIERRA LEONE

The Mendes whose Language is Made, entered Sierra Leone in the sixteenth century, conquered the existing kingdoms and divided the Kissi from the Bullom. The Mendes are outstanding for their wood carvings in Africa they produce mainly for their Women's societies, and particularly for the Bundu Society (The S ande society among is the Vais of Liberia) Which undertakes the education of the girls. Their training in the camp in the bush is a hard one. These Girls learn everything they need for their future life

as wives and mothers, which includes singing and dancing.

Characteristics:- hair is arrange in heavy crests; there is a high forehead over a small delicate face with lowered eyelids, and a broad spiral bulges of fat on the neck as an expression of prosperity and the idea of beauty. The hair is highly imaginative.

The Mende people also make statuettes which they call Minsere(figure 8). The heads of these Minseare display the same features as the Bundu masks, a high forehead, a small face and a ringed neck. The body is slim, naturalistic and with smooth lines. The Minsere are used by the yaisi society of prophetesses.

XIII. THE TOMA

A mande-speaking tribe in the region of Guinea around Maccenta , north-western Liberia and north-eastern Sierra Leone. They carve their hand a mask following the strict Sudanic style. They achieve the utmost cubic simplicity and concentration of form. A board like face with a featureless crocodile shape jaw and a straight nose under an arched forehead is the way the Toma represent the mighty Poro bush spirit. When the abstract face of wood stares out of the tangled costumes of leaves and skin, the effect is weird and unreal. The masks in Sierra Leone among the Mende people are of Toro types. The Poro and Sande. The Poro is for male initiation while the Sande is for female initiations, and it represents female with elaborate hair-do. The Sande masks are usually anointed with oil which ladies use to rub themselves.

XIV. DAN-NGERE

This region is known for their masks. The Dan and the related groups are savannah tribes, speaking the Mande tongue, who came from the north about three hundred years ago. In all the secrete societies the function of the masks is of outstanding importance.

They help men to control the environment and life, they support the chief in his tasks of ruling the land. Each mask represents a bush divinity, having its own spirit and name. Everyone wearing a mask is accompanied by musicians and assistants who even include a translator for the twittering of the secret language. The most important masks, of highest rank represent a powerful bush spirit and act as judges, lawgivers and peacemakers. They make the choice between war and peace, no one dares to lie in their presence, and they are a neutral court of appeal recognized by everyone.

Today these masks are regularly fed with the blood of cocks, palm oil and kolanuts.



Figure 1

The Yoruba have a high incidence of twins. However, the rate of child mortality is quite high, leading to the development of the *ibeji* or twin cult. If a twin dies, a figure is carved for the dead child, then clothed and fed alongside its live twin. If both children die, two figures such as these are created.



Figure 2

GELEDE MASK PAINTED WOOD 44.5cm, YORUBA, NIGERIA



Figure 3

YORUBA DIVINATION TRAYS 4, 10x12": Divination (*Ifa*) is practiced to explain misfortunes and help to prevent them. The diviner, in consulting a *diety*, manipulates sixteen palm nuts, reads the patterns they form and marks the results on a divination board sprinkled with wood dust. The marks indicate verses that should be chanted as prayers. with bowls are used to hold kola nuts as offerings of hospitality or as receptacles for sixteen sacred palm nuts used in divination.



Figure 4

YORUBA, STOOL 1, 19": Yoruba stools, like those of the Luba, related to kings and important chiefs, who defined their power by the display of prestige objects during important ceremonies. Stools were among the most important of these objects. The leader was literally as well as figuratively supported by a male or female caryatid figure, which also symbolizes the continuity of power.



Figure 5

YORUBA, SHANGO DANCE WAND 13, 16.5": In special festivals and processions, followers of Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder, carry dance wands, oshe shango, depicting a female devotee with Shango's symbol, the double-headed axe. Shango is thought to control the great powers of nature as one of the orisha, or gods.



Figure 6
EPA MASK



Figure 7
IKENGA FIGURES OF THE IGBOS SOUTHERN NIGERIA



Figure 8
THE MINSEREH OF SIERRA LEONE



Figure 9

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